



**IIIA** 4:1

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**WHAT ROLE MIGHT  
REGIONAL COOPERATION CLAIM  
IN THE EMERGING NEW WORLD ORDER?**



In the 4:1 series of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, four experts give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and to promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is *"What role might regional cooperation claim in the emerging new world order?"*

## Mihai Sebe

Following the end of the Cold War, we have assisted in an intensification of regional cooperation throughout the world, in a complex process involving both public and private stakeholders. That is even truer in our own region, marked simultaneously by cooperation and competition. It was regional cooperation that made the advances and that is difficult to criticize. Why object to something that may help us all?

In mentioning it, we need to have a more or less clear definition of what exactly it is. One scholar's definition states that it is *"a type of a collective intergovernmental action that takes place within a geographically bound setting, however vaguely defined or politically contestable. It denotes a process whereby three or more states adjust their behaviour in a coordinated way to achieve certain shared objectives."* We are dealing with varying cooperation from economic to security topics or institutional responses to common problems that may lead to a common regional conscience. Forged by both intra- and extra-regional factors, regional cooperation may take a new lease on life in the currently challenging times as it is becoming a permanent feature of the international system and we assist both *"overlapping regionalisms"*, and sub-regional cooperation, which may lead to formalization, interdependence and solidarity between the participating states.

In recent decades, the good practices of regional cooperation in our part of Europe have helped to further sustain European integration. The various regional formats have assisted a better integration of markets and favoured economic growth, while reducing bilateral tensions and encouraging better burden sharing amidst the participating states. That is even more important in the current geopolitical context, where *'polycrisis'* seems to be the defining word and buzzwords such as *'friendshoring'* and *'ally-shoring'* provide a new referential framework to regional cooperation.

Romania places strong emphasis on regional cooperation, as it helps consolidate political dialogue and the development of regional projects. Building up cooperation mechanisms to solve political, economic, security and cultural

problems has been at the forefront of regional cooperation. Moreover, regional cooperation was always designed to be complementary to both European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

As regional cooperation is becoming a priority, a series of Romanian scholars underlined the potential of a series of regional cooperation mechanisms such as the [Three Seas Initiative](#). That is a structure of which the “[primary objective remains not only to promote the economic development of the region through increased interconnection but also the European Union’s cohesion, and to reinforce the transatlantic bond](#)”. It is a project that has steadily grown toward [full political maturity](#) and which, in the new geopolitical reality, should go a long way toward promoting regional security and stability, consolidating engagement with the EU, and taking connectivity to the next stage, while members also increase their national commitment to the Three Seas Initiative itself.

The Three Seas Initiative is being seen as “[the geo-economic regional project by excellence – that of connecting the transport, energy and digital infrastructures within the EU](#)”. The same authors also identified a series of [inherent limitations](#) of the Three Seas Initiative that may be partially extrapolated to other projects: limited homogeneity; limited experience in regional cooperation without an extra-regional driver; limited (financial) resources and limited options for financing. Better coordination and an integrated approach to the regional cooperation mechanism is a must.

One key element for any regional cooperation should be the idea of solidarity and responsibility, as well as the [facilitation of a concerted EU action](#) with that of regional format, by capitalizing on existing partnerships and on the EU support instruments for the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership states, for instance. The regional cooperation mechanisms should do their part in upholding and promoting democratic values, fundamental rights and freedoms, stability and security, both in the region and globally, with the promotion and strict observance of international law and the rules-based international order, and the firm support of effective multilateralism.

From building up a bilateral trust, to identifying and promoting concrete projects, all those initiatives have had, and must still have, as an ultimate objective, the increase of the welfare and the quality of life of all citizens, as nobody should be left behind by societal evolution.

## Ágnes Vass

The world is undergoing a phase of significant and turbulent change that also affects the world order. New balances of power and new demands, are shaping international politics. The evidence of those new dynamics is shown, among other things, in the regrouping of forces based on national interests. As a result, new regional cooperation formats and new informal associations of states are emerging that are

creating new economic (and political) power centres. Also, connectivity, as a guiding principle of international politics, is based on the concept of being connected with as many countries as possible.

Connecting the Baltic and the Black Sea regions with the Adriatic was an important interest of [Polish foreign policy](#) even during the two world wars. However, that idea could not be realized in the international order that emerged after the First World War. The idea, although in a different form, became an initiative in 2015 with the creation of the Three Seas Initiative. That involves a transport corridor that could become an artery for the region, with the Via Carpatia route linking the Baltic Sea to the Aegean. The Three Seas Initiative could create a cooperation that could become an important factor in security policy as well as economic and energy objectives. It not only connects the North and South in terms of transport but also creates an axis that can be rapidly mobilized in the event of a security threat from the East, increasing the security of the participating countries and of Western Europe as a whole. However, unlike Hungary, where the inland section of the Via Carpatia has been [completed](#), not all participating countries are on [track](#).

The Middle Corridor is an economic and transport corridor linking China to Europe, bypassing Russia. However, it is currently an initiative the exact route of which is not yet defined. In other words, it is at an early stage, in which even Hungary is able to represent its interests. For Hungary, it could be important interest that the route does not bypass the Central European region, as there is already a structure in place here which is an advantage for the Middle Corridor, and the Adriatic region, the importance of which is becoming increasingly important due to the security challenges of the [Red Sea](#), is also close by,. The other practical reason is that if the route were to cross the Central European area, the need for a railway gauge change would be reduced. From a foreign policy point of view, the fact that it would also bring in the countries of the Eastern Opening and the Turkic Council along the same transport corridor, would be an important factor and would also serve Hungarian economic interests. However, it is also important to add that the Middle Corridor needs massive investment to fulfil its function. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) [estimates](#) that to overcome the logistical and infrastructure bottlenecks in the Middle Corridor, investment of \$19 billion and \$21 billion is needed.

In today's world, characterized by rapidly changing trade dynamics and escalating geopolitical tensions, the emergence of the Middle Corridor and the Three Seas Initiative as viable alternative trade routes, can fundamentally reshape dynamics in the broader region. The viability of such regional cooperation, regardless of how formal or informal that may be, depends on a stable geopolitical climate to allow goods to move freely without disruption from conflicts or political strife. In that context, regional stability is the most important requirement and reinforcing the security framework should be a priority for all current and potential stakeholders in these regions. These initiatives are not only alternatives for

freight or multimodal transport but also a unique opportunity to reshape the geopolitical and economic chessboard of central and eastern European, as well as Eurasian, regions.

## Aidar Kurmashev

In the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regional cooperation has become pivotal in shaping the new world order. The C5+1 format, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and a non-regional partner such as Russia, China, the US or the EU, exemplifies that trend. This essay will explore the rising influence of the C5+1 format across three critical domains: political partnerships, economic cooperation, and expert communication.

The C5+1 format has been instrumental in redefining political relationships between Central Asian countries and major powers. Initially established to enhance dialogue and collaboration on mutual issues, the C5+1 has evolved into a significant platform for balancing geopolitical interests. For instance, the [involvement of the US](#) and the [EU](#) alongside traditional regional influencers like Russia and China, showcases a strategic diversification of alliances for Central Asian countries. That diversification allows Central Asian countries to leverage their strategic geographic and political positions more effectively. They navigate complex international waters by engaging with multiple powerful stakeholders, thereby enhancing their sovereignty and regional stability. The format's success is evident in its ability to bring together diverse global powers to discuss and collaborate on regional security issues, economic development, and environmental challenges.

Economically, the C5+1 format has catalysed significant advancements in regional integration and connectivity. A crucial aspect of that integration is the development of the Middle Corridor as a transport route that links China with Europe, [passing through](#) Central Asia. Since 2017, there has been a substantial increase (doubling in 2022 and increasing by another 65% in 2023, now [reaching](#) 2.7 million tons of cargo) in the volume of transportation through Central Asian countries, underlining the region's growing importance as a global logistics hub. The increased freight traffic along the Middle Corridor not only boosts local economies but also strengthens economic ties between Asia and Europe. The route reduces dependency on traditional maritime shipping routes and offers a faster and more reliable [alternative](#) for cargo transit. The economic benefits are [multifaceted](#), including job creation, infrastructure development and increased foreign investment from nations keen on capitalizing on this emerging trade artery.

The third pillar of the C5+1's influence is the enhancement of expert communication. That involves a concerted effort to foster dialogue among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners on both regional and international levels. Through conferences, seminars, and joint research projects, experts discuss ways to stimulate social and

business interaction, implement cultural and humanitarian projects, and promote regional identity. For instance, the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Kazakhstan, has strengthened collaborative efforts with institutes for strategic studies in Central Asian countries. Annually, preceding the Consultative Meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia, expert [meetings are held](#) where the institutes openly discuss pressing issues related to bilateral and multilateral relations. That collaboration has led to concrete proposals addressing key issues such as promoting the digital economy, information-communication policy and environmental conservation, etc. Furthermore, such engagement helps in crafting a unified regional narrative that respects the distinct identities and aspirations of each member country while promoting a collective regional identity.

In conclusion, the Central Asian cooperation has become a cornerstone of regional and international diplomacy, economic cooperation and intellectual exchange. As the global geopolitical environment continues to shift, the role of such regional groupings will likely become even more crucial. For Central Asia, the regional format of cooperation is not merely diplomatic convening but a strategic apparatus through which the region can assert its place in the world, ensuring peace, prosperity and progress for both its nations and beyond. Through political acumen, economic integration, and vibrant expert communication, Central Asia is poised to play a pivotal role in the emerging new world order.

## Kránitz Péter Pál

In an era of an evolving new world order or, rather, a nonpolar disorder, the traditional rules and institutions of multilateralism are challenged and reset by the global East and South. While superpowers are preoccupied with political and military rivalry, middle ranking powers are on the rise and regional partners are giving way to multi-alignment and multiple connectivity projects. As the norms and rules of international affairs are [challenged](#), the weight of regional economic and political cooperation and evolving corridors such as the Three Seas Initiative, V4, or the Middle Corridor, is growing.

More and more observers are coming to realize that parallel to the decline of multilateralism, there is a growing need and necessity for minilateral cooperation. Where institutions of the unipolar world fail to navigate international relations through the stormy seas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, small groups of nations might succeed. With regard to the specific dilemmas of international relations, compared to large bodies in the international arena, minilateralism [offers](#) a more direct and sufficient approach, with the smallest possible number of participants and the largest possible impact on the matter at hand.

As our world enters a more and more unpredictable era, with war emerging as the new normal conflict resolution, regional partnerships and the minilateral cooperation of small states could take the lead in promoting peaceful dialogue. As Armen Sarkissian [noted](#),

small smart states “by their nature, [...] thrive on stability, security, peace, and sustained development” and therefore “have the potential to save the world from conflict and chaos by uniting their strength.” Hungary is among the network of such small states cherishing stability and security over the geopolitical rivalry of great powers and calling for the immediate peace process in its neighbourhood.

Hungary remains committed to existing regional cooperation in its neighborhood, such as the Visegrád Group, the Three Seas Initiative, or the Bucharest Nine. Despite political tensions within those blocs, cooperation remains strong due to the deep interconnectivity of economies and supply chains, mutual interests and shared values, and a strong historical track record. The Hungarian strategy of connectivity ventures upon further expanding mutually beneficial economic ties beyond its direct neighbourhood and establishing a multiplex cooperation network of markets, states, and international organizations, based on mutual respect and unbiased diplomatic efforts. Those endeavours are crucial investments to secure supply chains and an uninterrupted flow of raw materials and industrial goods, especially in an era of economic uncertainty and war. Economies through the Middle Corridor in the South Caucasus and Central Asia emerge as key partners for Europe in its quest for strategic autonomy.

Due to the nature of multiplex cooperation networks of trade corridors, international organizations and economic partnerships, certain vertices might be identified as well as bottlenecks in the flow of goods, services and ideas, and hubs of international connectivity. Hungary, a member of the EU, V4, the 3SI, an observer of the Organization of Turkic States, and a signatory to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, might be perceived as such a vertex on the juncture of West-East and North-South trade routes. Hungary, taking advantage of its complex network of connectivity, could play a key role in institutionalizing the interconnectivity of Eurasian economies, markets, and trade corridors.

**HIIA 4:1**

Series of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs

Publisher:

© Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2024.

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Typesetting: Tamás Lévárt

Cover:

<https://depositphotos.com>

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